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SWAMI VIVEKANANDA

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THE SUNDAY TIMES OFFICE,

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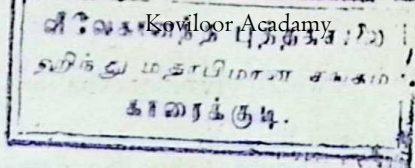
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# SWAMI VIVEKANANDA

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That Swami Vivekananda was not an ordinary man but one divinely connected was the view of Ramakrishna Paramahansa himself. Even before Vivekananda came to visit him at Dakshineswar, Ramakrishna had a revelation of his divine origin. This is how he described it:—

“One day I found that my mind was soaring high in Samadhi along a luminous path. It soon transcended the stellar universe and entered the subtler region of ideas. As it ascended higher and higher, I found on both sides of the way ideal forms of gods and goddesses. The mind then reached the outer limits of that region, where a luminous barrier separated the relative existence from that of the absolute.

“Crossing that barrier, the mind entered the transcendental realm, where no corporeal being was visible. Even the gods dared not peep into that sublime realm, and were content to keep their seats far below. But the next moment I saw even venerable sages seated there in Samadhi. It occurred to me that these sages must have surpassed not only men but even the gods in knowledge and holiness, in renunciation and love.

“Lost in admiration, I was reflecting on their greatness, when I saw a portion of that undifferentiated luminous region condense into the form of a divine child. The child came to one of the sages, tenderly clasped his neck with his lovely arms, and addressing him in a sweet voice, tried to drag his mind down from the state of Samadhi. That magic touch roused the sage from his superconscious state, and he fixed his half-open eyes upon the wonderful child. His beaming countenance showed that the child must have been the treasure of his heart.

“In great joy the child spoke to him, ‘I am going down. You too must go with me.’ The sage remained mute, but his tender look expressed his assent. As he kept gazing on the child, he was again immersed in Samadhi. I was surprised to

find that a fragment of his body and mind was descending on earth in the form of a bright light. No sooner had I seen Narendra than I recognized him to be that sage."

### **Birth and Childhood**

This remarkable child was born in the year 1863, and was named Narendra Nath.

His father, Viswanath Dutt, was a distinguished Attorney of the Calcutta High Court. He earned much, and also spent much in charity. His accomplishments were many, among which was music. He had a broad mind in religious matters. His wife Bhuvaneswari was also a gifted woman, endowed with deep faith in God.

As is to be expected, Narendra had a distinguished career from his childhood. He had a strong body and a vigorous mind. He had a prodigious intellect and an extraordinarily strong memory. He soon acquired mastery in various branches of learning. At the age of 12 he could compose verses in Sanskrit. He was also a skilled athlete and a good musician.

Even as a child he was religiously minded. He would purchase clay images of gods and play at meditation before them. One day, in a secluded corner of the house he actually lost himself in mimic meditation, and his relatives, after a long search, had to force open the door and shake him back to normal consciousness. In course of time, meditation became natural to him, and he spent a great part of the nights in that way. Like many other young men of his time, he joined the Brahmo Samaj and often went to Maharishi Devendra Nath for religious instruction. The Maharishi encouraged him in his meditations.

Even at this time he had visions. Referring to them later on he said: "Every night, as I went to bed, two visions floated before my mind's eye. One of them pictured me as a successful man in society, and I felt that I actually had the power to carve out such a place for myself. A moment later would come the other vision, in which I found myself a wandering monk, dressed in a loin cloth living on chance morsels of food and spending the night under trees, depending solely on God. I felt that I could lead this

sort of life, too. Of these two visions, the latter appealed to me the more, and I thought that the life of a monk was the noblest on earth, and that I would embrace it."

In his college days he made a thorough study of western philosophy, the agnostic doctrines of which gave a rude shock to his inborn faith in God. But the inner promptings of his heart kept him at his spiritual struggle.

### With Ramakrishna

His yearning to realise God grew intenser day by day. He got no help from the teachings of the Brahmo Samaj. In his eagerness he asked Maharishi Devendra Nath, point-blank, "Sir, have you seen God?" The answer he got did not satisfy him. It was at this critical moment of his life, that he first met Sri Ramakrishna at the house of Surendra Nath Mitra towards the end of 1880, when he was preparing for his First Examination in Arts. He sang a few songs, and Ramakrishna became interested in him and invited him to visit Dakshineswar at an early date.

He passed the examination. His father began to make arrangements for his marriage, but the negotiations fell through at his stubborn refusal to marry.

A little later he went to Dakshineswar with some of his friends. He was cordially received. He sang a few Bengalee songs at the Master's request.

What happened next may be given in Narendra's own words:—

"Well, I sang the song, but shortly after, he (Ramakrishna) suddenly rose, and taking me by the hand, led me to the northern verandah, shutting the door behind him. It was screened from outside; so we were alone. I thought he was going to give me some private instructions. But to my utter surprise, he began to shed profuse tears of joy as he held my hand, and addressing me most tenderly as one long familiar to him, said: 'Ah, you come so late! How could you be so unkind as to keep me waiting so long? My ears are well-nigh burnt in listening to the profane talk of worldly people. Oh, I am panting to unburden my mind to one who can appreciate my inner experiences.'"

"Thus he went on amidst sobs. Then he stood before me with folded palms and began to address me, 'Lord, I know you are that ancient sage, Nara,—the Incarnation of Narayana—born on earth to remove the misery of mankind,' and so on.

"I was altogether taken aback by his conduct. 'Who is this that I have come to see,' I thought. 'He must be stark mad! Why, I am but the son of Viswanath Dutt, and yet he dares to address me thus!'"

Then they came back to the room. "I sat and watched him," says Narendra Nath. "There was nothing wrong in his words, movements or behaviour towards others. He said, 'God can be realised. One can see and talk to Him as I am doing with you. But who cares to do so? People shed torrents of tears for their wife and children, for wealth or property, but who does so for the sake of God? If one weeps sincerely for Him, He surely manifests Himself.' As I heard these things, I could not but believe that he was saying them not like an ordinary preacher, but from depths of his own realisation."

### Strange Experiences

About a month afterwards, Narendra paid his second visit to the Master. This time he went alone. "He was glad to see me," he says, "and calling me affectionately to his side, made me sit beside him on the bed. Muttering something to himself, with his eye fixed on me, he slowly drew near me. In the twinkling of an eye he placed his right foot on my body. That touch at once gave rise to a novel experience within me. With my eyes open I saw that the walls and everything in the rooms whirled rapidly and vanished into nought, and the whole universe together with my individuality was about to merge in an all-encompassing mysterious Void! I was terribly frightened and thought I was facing death. Unable to control myself I cried out 'What is this that you are doing to me? I have my parents at home.' He laughed aloud at this and stroking my chest said 'All right, let it rest now. Everything will come in time!' The wonder of it was that no sooner had he said this than that strange experience of mine vanished. I was myself again and found everything within and without the room as it had been before."

When he visited the third time, he was determined not to be influenced. But he fared no better than on other occasions. Sri Ramakrishna took him out into the garden. After strolling for some time, they took their seats in the parlour. The Master soon fell into a trance and as Narendra watched, he was suddenly touched by him, and he immediately lost all outward consciousness. When he came back to his normal state, he found that the Master was stroking his chest.

### First Taste of Advaita

From the very first, Ramakrishna knew that Narendra Nath was the fittest person to be initiated into the mysteries of Advaita Philosophy. When advised to read Advaita treatises Narendra would say, "There is no greater sin in the world than to think of oneself as identical with the Creator. I am God, you are God, these created things are God—what can be more absurd than this?" The sages who wrote such things must have been insane."

For some time Narendra Nath refused to believe that there was any truth in the Advaita philosophy. One day the Master touched him in a semi-conscious state. That stupefied him. He saw nothing in the universe but God! For a number of days the sense of one-ness of all things continued in him. He felt himself always in a sort of comatose state. When he became normal again he realised that he must have had a glimpse of the Advaita state. Thenceforth he could not deny its truth.

Again and again the Master told Narendra Nath: "Test me as the money-changers do their coins. You must not accept me until you have tested me thoroughly." One day when the Master was away at Calcutta, Narendra came to Dakshineswar. Finding that there was none in the room, he desired to test the Master's renunciation of wealth. So he secreted a rupee under the bed, and went away into the garden. After a time Sri Ramakrishna returned, and no sooner had he touched the bed than he started back in great pain. Narendra Nath came in. An attendant examined the bed, and a rupee was found stuck in there. Narendra walked out of the room convinced.

### A Great Trial

In 1884 Narendra Nath's father suddenly died of heart disease, leaving his family to face dire poverty, as he had always spent or given away more than he earned. The creditors were knocking at the door. It fell upon young Narendra to support six or seven people, and he was forced to seek employment, but everywhere he met with refusal.

"A rich woman," he says, "suggested an ugly means, which I rejected with scorn, of ending my days of penury. I refused another woman also who came to me with similar overtures. In spite of all these struggles, I never lost my faith in the mercy of God."

After some months, the idea struck him that God listened to Sri Ramakrishna's prayers, so why should he not ask the Master to pray for the removal of his pecuniary wants. He hurried to Dakshineswar and made known his desire. The Master said: "My boy, I can't make such demands. But why don't you go and ask the Mother yourself? All your sufferings are due to your disregard of Her."

"As I went (to the temple)" he says, "I was filled with a divine intoxication. Reaching the temple, as I cast my eyes upon the image, I actually found that the Divine Mother was living and conscious. In an ecstasy of joy I prostrated myself again and again, and prayed, 'Mother, give me discrimination! Give me renunciation! Give me knowledge and devotion! Grant that I may have an uninterrupted vision of Thee!' A serene peace reigned in my soul. The world was forgotten. Only the Divine Mother shone within my heart."

"As soon as I returned, Sri Ramakrishna asked me if I had prayed to the Mother for the removal of my wordly wants. I was startled at his question and said 'No sir, I forgot all about it. But is there any remedy now?' 'Go again,' said he, 'and tell her about your wants.' I again set out for the temple, but at the sight of the Mother again forgot my mission!"

The same thing happened in the third attempt also. He now understood that all this was due to the Master. He said: "Sir, it is you who have cast a charm over my mind and made me forgetful. Now please grant me the boon that my

people at home may no longer suffer the pinch of poverty." The Master would not easily give in, and at last he said, "They will never be in want of plain food and clothing."

And so it happened.

### As The Leader

Before Ramakrishna passed away, he imparted his powers to Narendra Nath, who now became the head of the Master's young followers. A house was engaged at Baranagore, the first monastery of the Sanyasis.

Narendra was alive to the difficulties of the religious path. So, with utmost caution he began to mould their lives. He was never for one moment idle. For days together he would address the monks on social topics. He would take them through the ages of the whole world's history. He initiated them into the living realities of Hinduism. He made them masters of the Upanishads and other Shastras.

After sometime they were anxious to go out into the world and live as wandering monks, depending solely on God. So, one by one they left.

Swami Vivekananda went to Benares first. There he met numerous Pandits and Sanyasins. They all exclaimed, "Wonderful! so much vast experience and insight at such a young age! Surely he will be a great man."

Leaving Benares he visited a number of cities, including those lying in the Himalayan tracts.

In the course of his wanderings he came to the Alwar State, and stayed in a Dharmasala. Here he attracted great attention. The Dewan to the Maharajah chanced to hear of the presence of "a great Sadhu" in the city and so invited him to his house. The Dewan felt that the Swami would be a great influence in changing the bent of the mind of the Maharajah, Mangal Singh, who had become much anglicised. With this thought he wrote to the Maharajah, who was at that time living in a palace two or three miles distant, saying "A great Sadhu has come who has a stupendous knowledge of English." The very next day the Maharajah came to the city, and coming to the Dewan's house, he met the Swami and bowed down before him.

Almost the first words uttered by the Maharajah were, "Well, Swamiji Maharaj, I hear that you are a great scholar.

You can easily earn a handsome sum of money every month. Why then do you go about begging?" The Swami replied with the question, "Maharaj, tell me why you spend your time constantly in the company of the Westerners and go on shooting excursions, neglecting your duties to the State."

The Maharajah could only say, "I cannot say why, but no doubt because I like to!"

"Well, for that very reason, I go wandering about as a Fakir."

He remained in Alwar for nearly seven weeks in which time a number of people gathered around him as his disciples.

Leaving Alwar, he wandered on and on and came to the celebrated hill resort of Mount Abu, where he met the Maharajah of Khetri. The prince became much attached to him, having never met a Sanyasin of this type. He went to Khetri and remained there for a number of weeks. The whole town of Khetri became enamoured of him.

Then he wandered into the province of Guzerat. Wherever he went, he was received cordially both by the great and small. Maharajahs were anxious to have him as their guest.

While at Porebander he heard of the great Religious Convention that was to be held some time in the following year (1893). He said to one of his disciples there, "If some one helps me with the passage-money, all will be well, and I shall go."

He then came to Bombay, and remained there for several weeks, after which he moved on to Poona. Here he met Lokamanya Tilak and stayed as his guest for ten days.

### For The Masses

Whilst he was at Belgaum, some people criticised him for having mixed with Rajahs and Maharajahs. Questioned on that point he said, "O, they do not understand! Don't you see how much more profitable it is to change the mind of a prince than that of dozens of ordinary persons? True, the latter have the will to do good work for others—where are their means to do so? The Rajahs control the affairs of

millions. They have the power to do good to others. Themselves instructed, they will instruct the people."

From Belgaum, he came to Bangalore. Here too the Maharajah became greatly attached to him. One day the Maharajah asked: "Swamiji, what can I do for you?" The Swami evading a direct reply, spoke on his Mission. He said that he felt it was India's duty to give what treasure it possessed to the people of the West and that he himself was intending to go to America to preach the Gospel of the Vedanta. "And what I want," he continued, "is that the West shall help us in improving our material condition, by providing us with the means of educating our people on modern lines of agriculture, industries and other technical sciences." The Maharaja promised, then and there, the necessary money to defray his travelling expenses. But the Swamiji refused the offer.

Soon he came to Kanya Kumari, and entered into a long meditation.

During his travels all over India he had passed sleepless nights, thinking of the poor. It was here at Kanya Kumari his concern for the masses became most intense. From this moment his life was consecrated to the service of India, particularly to the outcaste Narayanas, to the starving Narayanas, and to the oppressed Narayanas. He became the patriot and the prophet in one. And he said unto himself, "Yes, I have found my mission at last! I must go to the West for the spreading of the Light of the Dharma for the good of India and the world. Yes, the West,—the glorious, the practical and powerful West that must come to understand, accept the vision and the dignity of the Sanatana Dharma. And then, having seen the West's understanding of the East, the East itself would come to realise an invigorated and reborn self-consciousness."

On his way to Bombay he visited Madras and Hyderabad. In both the places he conquered the hearts of thousands.

### Call from the West

At last the day for him to leave for the West arrived. It was the 31st of May, 1893. At the insistence of

friends he dressed himself in a robe of ochre silk and a turban of the same material. He looked like a prince. He was choked up with emotions. When finally the moment of departure came there were tears in his eyes.

Even on board the ship he became the centre of attention and admiration. He was referred to as the "orange-robed Oriental with the luminous countenance and the tiger-like carriage." The captain showed him the entire ship explaining to him the mechanism of the engines, which the Swami closely examined. He made a number of friends, several of whom were Germans.

He landed at Vancouver. Through cities after cities the train carried him, until finally on the third day, he found himself, bewildered as a child, in the city of Chicago. Being unused to handling money and to the ways of travelling in a foreign land he had been robbed and imposed upon at every stage of his journey.

His strange dress made him conspicuous and street urchins ran after him in amusement. He was weary and confused. On all sides there was a great mass of humanity, chiefly visitors to and from the World's Fair. The Swami happened to meet a hotel clerk, who made it clear to him that his hotel was the best in every way. After a short drive he found himself entering a marbled lobby of one of the fashionable hotels, and was soon taken up by the elevator to the floor on which was the room reserved for him.

On the following day he visited the World's Fair. Here he saw the latest products of the inventive and artistic mind of the entire world brought to a focus for examination and admiration. He was roused to the highest pitch of enthusiasm. He visited the various exhibitions and returned to his hotel in the evening quite exhausted.

As days went on, the Chicago newspapers became interested in this strange personality. The reporters had found him out. He was sought on the Fair-grounds and besieged with questions. All marvelled at his cosmopolitanism and his high mental calibre.

### **A Bad Shock**

One day he went to the Information Bureau of the Exposition in order to learn details concerning the Parliament

of Religions. To his dismay he learned that it would not commence until after the first week of September, and also that no one could be admitted as a delegate unless he had proper references, and finally he was told, that the time for adding to the number of delegates had gone by.

This broke his spirit. Moreover, his purse was gradually emptying itself. A great depression came over him; but he was determined not to give up easily. He decided to make every effort to succeed in America, and if he failed, to try in England, and if he failed there, too, he could go back to India and wait for further commands from on High.

Hearing that Boston was the Athens of America, and much less expensive than Chicago he left for that place. Travelling with him in the same carriage was an elderly lady from a village near Boston. She observed him closely and was attracted by his noble personality. She thought it would be nice to have him live for some time at her house. She was more than interested to know that he was an Indian monk and had come to America to preach the great truths of Vedanta. She said, "Well Swami, I invite you to my house and live there. Perhaps something will turn up in your favour." He readily consented, and accordingly he found himself lodged in a beautiful house.

Some of those who visited him were influential people and they invited him to speak before a large Ladies' Club, that had interested itself in the heroic Ramabai. His lecture at the Club was a success.

Slowly the way was opening up for him. Many distinguished persons called on him. Prof. J. H. Wright of Harvard University was one and he became so deeply impressed with Swamij's rare ability that he insisted that he should represent Hinduism in the Parliament, and said, "This is the only way by which you can be introduced to the nation at large." The Swami said he had no credentials. Prof. Wright spoke out, "To ask you, Swami, for your credentials, is like asking the sun to state its right to shine!"

The Professor at once wrote to his friend, the Chairman of the Committee for selecting delegates, stating that, "Here is a man who is more learned than all our learned professors.

put together." Knowing that the Swami had not enough money, he kindly presented him with a ticket to Chicago, and also give him letters of introduction to the Committee which had in charge the matters of housing and providing for Oriental delegates.

### At the Parliament

The Parliament met in September 1893.

When he rose to speak, he was filled with the ideas and spirit of the Vedanta and breathing a short prayer to Saraswati, the Goddess of knowledge, he addressed his audience as "Sisters and Brothers of America." And before he could utter another word, the whole Parliament burst into cheering. Hundreds upon hundreds rose to their feet; and sent up deafening notes of applause over and over again. He had called them 'Sisters and Brothers.' The others had addressed in formal and conventional ways. "Not one of our people had thought of that," they said.

When silence was restored the Swami began his address. It was only a short speech introducing Hinduism as "The Mother of Religions, a religion which has taught the world both tolerance and universal acceptance."

More than one thousand papers were read by the different delegates. This gives some impression of the vastness of the Parliament. The Swami himself spoke several times.

When the Parliament concluded, Swami Vivekananda was in the lime-light of the world's recognition. Life-size pictures of him were seen posted up in the streets of Chicago, with the words "The Monk Vivekananda" and hundreds of passers-by were observed to stop and do reverence with bowed head and folded hands to these likenesses. The press rang with his name.

Everywhere he was invited to speak. He found that the natural exclusiveness due to racial conceit had been aggravated by the tales of the Missionaries concerning the alleged barbarism and the benighted condition of the East and of India in particular. When lecturing at Minneapolis, he was asked if the Hindu mothers threw their children to the crocodiles in the rivers, he said, "Yes, Madam! They threw me in, but like your fabled Jonah I got out again."

## The First Disciples

He preached in clubs and churches until his faith became familiar to the American nation. The new idea of Hinduism was so fascinating that many became his disciples. It was his earnest desire to initiate a few as sanyasins, and to train them so that they would be fitted to carry on his American work in his absence. Two had already become his proclaimed disciples; and these two were initiated into the Sanyasin order. They were Madame Marie Louise and Herr Leon Landsberg, and they were re-named as Swami Abhayananda and Swami Kripananda respectively.

After being almost exhausted with class work and public lectures for two years, he accepted the invitation of one of his friends to rest in the silence of the pine woods, which were known as Thousand Island Park. Here too people anxious for instruction thronged, and classes were held.

Having fulfilled his work of training and initiating disciples at the Thousand Island Park, he returned to New York, to sail to England. And in the middle of August 1895, he bade farewell to America. On his way he landed in Paris, and made the most of his brief stay by visiting its museums, its churches, its cathedrals, its art galleries. The tomb of Napoleon and the memories of that great warrior, which are scattered everywhere in Paris, filled him with admiration. Finally, he arrived in London. The very sight of that city thrilled him. He was received by friends. His fame had preceded him. He received numerous invitations; and within three weeks of his arrival he found himself launched into strenuous work. He preached and taught upon the universal theme of the Vedanta and upon the four Margas or paths of highest spiritual realisation.

During his absence in England, the work of spreading the Vedanta was successfully carried on by his disciples in America. On his return he found it well established.

The truth he taught the people was: "The absolute does not change or re-evolve. In the little amœba is that infinite perfection latent. It is called amœba from its amœba covering, and from the amœba to the perfect man the change

is not in what is inside ; that remains the same, unchangeable ; but the change occurs in the covering. ”

### **The R. K. Mission**

After fulfilling his mission in the West the Swami returned to India. He had yet to fulfil his trust in regard to his own motherland. In 1899, he founded the Ramakrishna Order of Sanyasins with its head-quarters at the Balur Math in the District of Howrah. To this monastic institution a legal status was given by him through a deed of trust executed early in 1901. The same year he passed away from this mortal plane.

The Math has since then been carrying on the mission of the Master, preaching those truths which he had demonstrated in his life and helping people to follow them in their lives for their temporal and spiritual advancement.

The Math has been spreading the message of Sri Ramakrishna for the establishment of fellowship among the followers of different religions, knowing them to be so many forms of the one universal and eternal religion.

The Math has now branches covering the whole of India. It is always ready with help whenever there is public distress due to famine, flood or epidemics. It knows no distinction of caste, color or creed.

(SECOND EDITION).